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**PRELIMINARY REPORT
CLIMATE FOR GAY, LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS AT
MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE**

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Background and Methodology. As part of a sabbatical research project designed to assess the climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students at six small liberal arts colleges, I requested permission from Middlebury College to visit campus and assess the climate.

The research was undertaken during the week of April 8, 1996. It involved several different components. First, a survey was sent to 400 Middlebury students selected systematically from the student directory. The survey was designed to assess attitudes and behavior in the general student population. Of the 380 that found their way into student mailboxes, 146 were returned, a response rate of 38.4 percent. Survey data have been entered into the computer but they have not been analyzed. Response rates at the other colleges were 42.9, 42.8, 42.5, 28.4, 23.4.

A second component of the research involved the interviewing of 14 administrators and faculty who were deemed important in understanding the climate. Among these were two who identified as gay or lesbian.

A third component involved surveying those students who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and interviewing those who agreed. Seventeen students completed the survey and 13 were interviewed. At only one other college did the number of students surveyed exceed 17 and that total was 18. At that college, however, almost all of the students

surveyed agreed to be interviewed. Survey data have not yet been analyzed. I attended one of the weekly meetings of MidGLBA.

A final component of the research involved an assessment of various campus offices such as admissions, the library, athletics, and the college store. This was done through casual observation, interviews, and informal questioning of staff members.

A cautionary note. Clearly under-represented in the research are faculty in general and lesbian faculty and staff. Also missing are lesbian students who are closeted and thus were unwilling to come forward to talk to me even though the invitation was extended through newspaper advertisements and posters and confidentiality was guaranteed.

Hinrichs' Climate Scale. Attached to this report is a description of a climate scale that I developed as a part of the research. I will use it to describe the climate of various campus offices and of the campus in general. The scale goes from a -1 (black triangle) to a +4 (4 pink triangles). Since I have only completed this research on six liberal arts college campuses and, since at each campus students were able to name colleges that they thought were better than the one where they were, I am reluctant at this point to use the highest rating, especially when rating the college as a whole.

Observations and Impressions of Middlebury College's Climate for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students.

Overview of Middlebury College:

Middlebury College is a private, non-sectarian, coeducational liberal arts college with approximately 2023 students, about one-half male and one-half female.

The College no longer has traditional single-sex social fraternities and sororities. The sorority system passed away in the mid 1960s and in

1990 the Board of Trustees mandated a move away from fraternities and all single-sex organizations were banned. The system was replaced with Social Houses that must be at least one-third female. The houses do have Greek letters and the average size is around 40. About 20 percent of the student body belongs to these social houses. Anyone who wants to pledge a social house is guaranteed a spot if he or she follows the rush and pledging rules.

In 1985, the faculty approved the inclusion of sexual orientation in the harassment document. A faculty member urged the Provost to seek approval from the Board of Trustees to include sexual orientation in the non-discrimination clause. The Board disapproved this. In the spring, 1993, the same faculty member asked the interim President to bring the issue to the Board for reconsideration. Apparently, the Board was bypassed and sexual orientation was simply written into the non-discrimination clause at that time.

Extension of college benefits to partners, including same-sex partners, was recently approved by the Board of Trustees.

Sexual orientation is a protected class in student policies and regulations, including the harassment policy. In a policy entitled, "Respect for Persons and Property," the following is written: "The College expects all members of the College community to respect the dignity, freedom, and rights of others. Violence in word or deed against another; incitement or provocation to violence;...prevention of another's freedom of expression of ideas by intimidation, abuse, or physical force; defamation, are all considered serious offenses, any one of which may lead to disciplinary proceedings with a maximum penalty of dismissal"

There is general agreement that a lot has changed in a positive direction in the past five years relative to the climate for lesbian and gay persons. The factors that are cited as important in this include the founding of MidGALA and the work of Leroy Nesbit, Richard Cornwell, Roman Graf, and Matt Longman.

Admissions Office: ▽ ▽ ▽

My impression is that admissions office staff members are open about lesbian issues when asked, do not hide or apologize about lesbian issues and persons on campus, and encourage diversity. The Admissions Director said that he would not hesitate to hire an out lesbian student as a tour guide. The director said that the College has a commitment to diversity and in creating a market place of ideas. MidGLBA is welcomed as a participant in prospective student activity fairs. The admissions office staff believe that Middlebury is a good place for lesbian persons.

College Bookstore: ▽

My impression is that the staff of the college bookstore do not have a clue about lesbian issues. The trade book person was not able to talk much about lesbian books. I was told that any books they did have were in the self-help section or psychology. I could find only three books in the psychology section. There were no lesbian magazines for purchase. In terms of lesbian issues, this bookstore was clearly one of the weakest of the six colleges I assessed in this study.

College Library: ▽ ▽ ▽

The Library gets the *Advocate*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, and *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*. A search of the on-line catalog using key words related to lesbian issues and persons yielded a lot of sources. Inter-library loan opens up more possibilities.

Athletics: ▽ ▽

The information I received was general in nature. There does not seem to be a problem with homophobia on the teams or in the department. My informant said that he used to hear "fag" jokes early in his career, but now there is more awareness and less of this offensive behavior. I was

told that the issue has not been raised in meetings of the coaching staff or team captains. I was also told that one former coach was gay/lesbian and that the person was open about it. This coach was accepted as a professional by fellow coaches and team members. My informant said that Middlebury had a very open environment and that people are respected for the job they do regardless of their sexual orientation.

Counseling Center:



The counseling center is sensitive to lesbigay issues and persons and has been proactive. About six years ago, the director of counseling put a notice in the Alumni Magazine to invite lesbigay alums (whom he called disenfranchised alums) back to campus on a spring weekend. About eight alums returned for a panel discussion that about 150 persons attended. Out of this grew MidGALA. There is an out lesbian counselor on staff but she works only one-half time and lives some distance from the campus. It is doubtful that many students know her.

Health Issues:



The Health Center does HIV testing at a cost of \$25 to the student. The test is confidential but not anonymous. There is counseling before and after the test. Free and anonymous testing is available by calling the Vermont HIV Hotline. Students can see a doctor in Vergennes a few miles from campus. Safe sex education is provided by the nursing staff, the health educator, and the residence staff. Condoms are provided free to students without question. There are baskets of condoms in the lobby of the health center.

Curriculum Issues:



My understanding is that gay and lesbian studies are not a visible part of the curriculum at Middlebury College. I was told that only one professor teaches specific courses in gay and lesbian issues from time to time. I could not find any listed in the catalogue, however. There is no

gay and lesbian studies program although there is apparently some talk about initiating one. There is some debate, however, over having such a program and how it should be established. Some people believe that any such program should be housed under a Gender Studies Program along with Women's Studies or be part of a diversity requirement. At many colleges, lesbigay issues, particularly lesbian history and literature, are a vital part of the courses in Women's Studies. I cannot confirm that this is true at Middlebury. One person said that in his/her opinion, the curriculum of Middlebury did not reflect the diversity in American society as much as it should. The College has a Culture and Civilizations Requirement that includes the requirement for students to take one course focusing on some aspect of cultures and civilizations of the United States. I would hope that some courses in gay and lesbian studies would fit this requirement.

Administration: ▽ ▽ ▽

Those with whom I talked were open and knowledgeable and willing to talk about the campus environment. Everyone knows some faculty/administration/staff who are gay or lesbian. Most know some students, at least by reputation. I was somewhat surprised that there seemed to be more lack of awareness of lesbigay issues on campus than one might expect since most of the senior administrators have been at Middlebury for many years as faculty members. No one was negative about lesbigay issues and persons; it just seemed that this issue was not an important agenda item although it was on the agenda with other items. Some of this can be summed up in the following comments made about the climate on campus for lesbigay faculty/staff/administration: "There are reasons to feel both comfortable and uncomfortable;" "I don't think that there are many people reaching out to them to offer help and support;" "benign tolerance." One administrator said that the campus community does not see this as an issue. There was some consensus that the administration is reactive as opposed to proactive relative to lesbigay issues. However, at least one person felt that they were this way on other issues also.

Somewhat disconcerting are the little incidents that were reported. For example, there are the occasional stories that circulate on the campus

or make their way into print that call into question the sexual orientation of a member of the faculty/staff/administration. Also, a person who works out at the fitness center regularly reports hearing such comments as, "fucking faggots," "oh, that gay," "she's a lesbo; what do you expect?" Another incident occurred when a faculty member used the all-campus electronic mail system to seek signatures on a petition in support of the banning of gay organizations in the Utah schools. One person, in what was perceived as being an homophobic tone, told the faculty member that the message was a violation of policy

Dean Anderson told me that in a letter she sends to incoming first year students, she addresses the issue of diversity. Among diverse persons she tells first year students they will meet are those with a different sexual orientation. While there are some attempts to deal with sexual orientation diversity in first year student orientation and residential life staff training, I did not sense that this was consistently done.

There are two very strong advocates in the administration for lesbian/gay persons and issues. One of these is Leroy Nesbit, Special Assistant to the President. Mr. Nesbit is a conduit to the president on issues of difference and issues of American diversity on the campus. The other person is Matt Longman. He helped found Ally in 1992. One of the lesbian/gay students interviewed identified Matt as a role model.

One person told me about the Human Relations Committee that was founded on an ad hoc basis in 1982 and then formalized in 1984. The committee members did programs that addressed issues of difference. The committee was disbanded two years ago because other areas of the college were handling the same issues. I was told that there will soon be a review to determine if there are any areas not currently receiving the support that is needed.

Comments by Faculty and Members of the Administration:

"Population here is more receptive to difference and more prideful of diversity than many places;" "climate is relatively positive;" "not really

a social support network here for gay/lesbian/bisexual faculty;" "perceived pressure not to come out;" "very difficult for an open gay/lesbian/bisexual faculty member to work here - not because of prejudices, but because this is a small college where the community is family oriented; this puts the gay or lesbian person in a very bad position;" "I'm both proud and disappointed;" "straights need to talk about sexuality;" "the climate is exceptionally good; it says a lot that students are out by the end of the first semester;" "college is heterocentric;" "certain departments are a problem for a young gay or lesbian faculty member;" "on the surface this a very gay friendly campus, but underneath...;" "fairly open campus;" "people not outrightly discriminated against;" "some staff and faculty have outed others" (although not always intentionally); "some level of anxiety at the Board of Trustee level;" "gay issues incredibly visible last three years; administration realizes that a conservative campus is not what they want;" "college is willing to move if there is no cost or charge;" "need a real commitment; need statements by the President that homophobia is an issue on this campus;" "college needs to promote awareness at high levels so faculty will understand."

Gay and Lesbian Faculty/Staff/Administration:

Since I only talked to two persons, both faculty members, it is somewhat tricky to write about the interviews. However, most of those faculty/staff/administration who were asked said that they knew four to six persons who were gay or lesbian. Hopefully, the two persons I talked to are relatively anonymous, therefore. One of the faculty members has been a member of the campus community for many years. This person has experienced, from time to time, verbal abuse on the campus. This person also feels that the members of the campus community do not always appreciate or value his work in behalf of lesbigay issues and persons. The other faculty member has joined the faculty more recently and was hired with full knowledge that he/she is gay. This individual said that the climate on campus is very positive and that, "they really want my input." This person also said that people change their behavior when he/she comes into the room. This same individual also reported that a colleague periodically says to him, "God will judge."

MidGLBA (Middlebury Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alliance):

There was a support group on campus for lesbigay persons from about the mid-1970s to around 1984 when it died. The group was re-established around 1990. It meets weekly on Sunday evenings in the Women's Center since it does not have a separate space. The group has a bulletin board in the Center.

The group is open to lesbigay persons as well as friends. ALL members of the campus community are welcome as are people from the community. However, no members of the faculty/administration/staff usually attend meetings. The group has 30-40 active members and a mailing list of 60, including some faculty/administration/staff. Of the active members, about 18 are out of the closet. Of these, 15 are males. At the April 7 meeting, there were 12 persons in attendance, three of whom were friends.

MidGLBA belongs to the SGA as a non-voting member and sends an ambassador to meetings. They received \$4000 in funds for the current year. This was double the allocation of the previous year. The group has a WEB page. MidGLBA members sponsor speakers, dances, films, and panel. This past semester, they send a "right to marry" petition to campus organizations for support. This petition was sponsored by the Vermont Freedom to Marry Group. MidGLBA was currently organizing a panel on the contribution of queer studies to the liberal arts college. Once or twice a semester MidGLBA members do a road trip to Montreal.

Each year MidGLBA members put out a list of lesbigay students and allies, each designated, with phone numbers, so students can have a variety of people to contract if they have a question or concern. The list begins with the following preamble:

Being lesbian, gay, bisexual - being unequivocally you, with regard and respect for you sexual identity, is difficult traveling. MidGLBA has gathered these names of people who are learning and surmounting the same obstacles as you may be. Please feel

welcome to contact any of us with your concerns and questions.

OutLOUD was formed in 1995 as a political group and subcommittee of MidGLBA. It includes about eight students. The group did not function during the 1995-96 academic year.

MidGLBA is a very strong organization and its members get along very well. Of all the groups I had the privilege of seeing in action on the various campuses, Middlebury's GLBA was the most congenial. People at the meeting I attended really seemed to enjoy one another.

MidGALA (Middlebury Gay and Lesbian Alumni):

In the spring, 1993, lesbigay students asked Leroy Nesbit for help. In October, 1993, during Coming Out Week, Leroy invited two high powered lesbigay alums to campus. MidGALA was founded after this event. Alums return each year for a weekend of activities. In 1994, MidGALA sponsored a weekend getaway at Middlebury's Mountain campus. The group has 54 members who agree to have their names published. There are more names on the list, however. This use of alumni is a model for other colleges.

GLEAM (Gay/Lesbian Employees at Middlebury):

This group was founded in the early 1990s by Sage Russell, a staff member. The group is not proactive at this time but is primarily a social/friendship group. Currently four staff men meet once a week over lunch.

ALLY:

This group was founded in 1992 by Matt Longman after the Student Affairs staff attended a conference at the University of Vermont that dealt with meeting the needs of lesbigay students on campus. The group is a staff group, not a student group, and thus it does not belong to SGA and does not have any funding. The group sponsors an annual dinner in the fall

and about 50 students and 30 faculty/staff attend. ALLY sets up displays at the activities fairs.

The group is fairly inactive at this time because MidGLBA is very strong. Matt has been the facilitator of Ally, but two new facilitators will take over soon. The new facilitators are both women, one a faculty member and one a staff member.

Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students:

Have you grown at Middlebury in terms of your sexual identity?

Of the 13 students interviewed, 12 said that they had grown and the response of one person was confusing and hard to categorize. One person who said yes said that the growth was not due to Middlebury but to friends. Comments from students included the following: "This place has helped me so much;" "I have been forced to confront myself." "definitely - became conscious of myself as a feminist;" "growth from interaction with the members of MidGLBA;"; "it has been extremely liberating in discovering my own sexuality."

Is there a queer community on campus?

All of the students interviewed said that there was a small lesbian/gay community at Middlebury. Eleven said that it was centered on MidGLBA and friends of those in MidGLBA. Only one person felt that the community was larger than MidGLBA. Unlike similar groups on the other campuses studied, members of MidGLBA tend to hang around with each other outside of the weekly meetings. Hang outs on campus include the lower Proctor dining room and the Gamut room, the campus coffee house. I believe that there is a real lesbian/gay community on the Middlebury campus that is not found on most other campuses and certainly not on the campuses represented in this study.

Are there any role models on campus?

Professors Cornwell and Graf were cited by most respondents as role models on the campus. Matt Longman was also cited as a role model by one of the students. Nine of the students named other students on campus as role models. Faculty members were role models if they were out because their career success was evident to the students. Student role models were those queer students who were out and comfortable with themselves.

Many students, especially women, cited the serious lack of lesbian role models at Middlebury. No one knew of a lesbian faculty, staff, or administration member. Women felt quite deprived in this regard.

Positive comments about Middlebury:

"I can be really out here and not experience much hostility;" "There is one social house I feel comfortable in; I don't go to the others;" "can pretty much do whatever you want to because it is so politically incorrect to say anything;" "won't get harassed or attacked;" "compared to home, this is a good place;" "safe atmosphere;" "I can dance with women here and even be affectionate and not think that anything bad will happen;" "is safe and tolerant place, but not encouraging; people feel pressure not to be violent;" "is safe to be queer on this campus;" "there are some really supportive faculty here;" "campus has made me queer;" "not much overt homophobia;" "being here has been wonderful as a queer person; had a lot of lover's quarrels with this place;" "I've grown a lot here."

Would you recommend Middlebury to a prospective lesbigay student?

Six of the 13 students said, "yes," three said, "no," and three said that it would depend. Another said that it was a "tough call." Most cited the most serious problem on campus as being the small dating pool and social environment for lesbigay students. One student said that if a person was from a big city, he or she would be unhappy here. Another said, "If you are up to an adventure, this is a good place."

Cautionary comments about Middlebury:

"Need to take away the silence; I want people to talk about the issue;" "what bothers people is the silent prejudice;" "college is very liberal in theory, but conservative in practice;" "have gotten 'looks' from jocks;" "people are too politically correct here; would rather they react. Could then talk about it;" "don't really know what people are thinking;" "there isn't much to do here;" "someone put 'fucking faggot homosexual go away' on door;" "immense heterosexism here;" "just because there is a gay organization does not mean it will be home for a queer person;" "bigger issue to be working class on campus than queer; I feel more marginalized in being poor;" "a lot of homophobia here;" "I feel that if I had gone to Vassar I would have come out sooner and louder;" "I feel that I'm pushed into heterosexuality;" "this culture is cold in supporting sexual minorities;" "I identify with the lesbian community, but there aren't any here;" "a big segment of the campus have mental blocks; they are taught in a rut of traditional concepts of sexuality;" "not a great place for political action;" "personal attacks on me in an article;"

Issues, Concerns and Suggestions.

1. Leroy Nesbit said to me, "You can't become educated if your are worrying about identity issues." And, it seems that students are worrying about these issues. Lesbians seem to worry most because there are no role models for them at Middlebury.

2. The fact that there are "no lesbians" at Middlebury is puzzling. After interviewing the women students who identified themselves as bisexual, I was convinced that they were sincere in their self-description. But this is still puzzling. At only one other school did I encounter so many bisexual women and this was a college with an excellent climate where many women identified as lesbian, but where female students said that it was fashionable at the school to be bisexual. I wonder whether the lack of role modes for lesbians and a concomitant internalization of homophobia is causing women to identify as bisexual for their own well being.

3. The worrying lesbigay students do is seen in the suggestions that they make for improving Middlebury. They want increased visibility, more educational efforts, and conversation on campus about lesbigay issues. They also want more courses specifically dealing with lesbigay issues, a Queer Studies Program, and the integration of lesbigay issues into the classroom. If these things occurred, the comfort level of lesbigay students would increase. I think that this can be summed up in the desire to break the silence and make sexuality a topic of importance and discussion on the campus.

4. The strength and camaraderie of MidGLBA members is a real plus for Middlebury. Hopefully this will continue. However, this continuation is dependent on the students themselves. All of us know that the vitality of any organization is directly related to the quality of the students and their leadership. Continued influx of out, active, and respected students into MidGLBA is critical, therefore.

5. The strengthening of a diversity component during the orientation of first year students, to include formal and serious discussion of sexual diversity, is worthy of consideration.

6. The incidents of overt homophobia that seem to occur somewhat regularly on campus at all levels should be cause for concern. The presence of these indicate that at least some members of the campus community think that it is okay to say and do what they please. College officials and faculty need to make it clear that they will not tolerate such behavior.

7. While members of the administration are clearly sensitive to lesbigay issues and persons, it does seem that those at the highest levels need to make stronger statements and take stronger stands than are currently occurring. Many people said to me that stronger administration support was needed on campus.

Middlebury College's Climate for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students.

Middlebury College relative to lesbigay persons and issues seems to be a study in contrasts. On the one hand, the college has a sensitive administration, some well respected out faculty members, at least two very strong advocates for lesbigay persons, a very strong group of lesbigay students who are out and active on campus, and a very strong alumni group. On the other hand there is a shortage of out faculty members, especially women; recurring evidences of overt homophobia; and some apparent reluctance by some persons to speak firmly in support of lesbigay persons.

Climate Scale Rating:

▽▽▽

*circulate to
VP group*

HINRICHS' QUEER CLIMATE SCALE FOR DESCRIBING THE CLIMATE FOR GAY, LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL PERSONS ON COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES*

▼ No sensitivity to or understanding of lesbian persons and issues plus overt or covert hostility. Verbal abuse, and perhaps physical abuse, are evident and tolerated. College position on lesbian issues is negative.

▼ Low level of sensitivity to and understanding of lesbian persons and issues. Such concerns are not part of the college's agenda and have no priority. College officials are clearly reactive with the college position being non-committal. Lesbian issues are only talked about when a problem arises and then nothing may be done. Some things may be happening on campus, but everything is a struggle. Environment is viewed as unfriendly and non-supportive by lesbian persons.

▼▼ Moderate level of sensitivity to and understanding of the issues facing lesbian persons. Some people want to do more but don't know what to do or how to learn what to do, and they receive little support. College officials are reactive and such issues are not part of the campus agenda. When issues and concerns arise, they are seriously talked about and addressed. Environment is likely viewed as unfriendly and non-supportive by lesbian students, but lesbian faculty and staff may see the environment as ranging from negative to neutral.

▼▼▼ Fairly high level of sensitivity to and understanding of the issues facing lesbians, and efforts are being made to effect change. Such issues may not be high on the college's agenda, but they are in the consciousness of college officials who are somewhat proactive relative to lesbian concerns. The campus environment is viewed as relatively friendly by most lesbian persons although there may be hostile incidents from time to time.

▼▼▼▼ Total commitment to equality, tolerance, and acceptance for all persons. This is a goal of the college and it has a high priority in all decisions. College officials set the tone for inclusiveness. Intolerance is not accepted. College officials are clearly proactive. Everyone at the college agrees that the environment for lesbians is very good.

* The above characterizations are kept relatively brief and general since there are many factors that can be assessed on each college campus and there is not always the degree of consistency that one would expect. Therefore, the above ratings are meant to assess a tone despite the inconsistencies.